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ABSTRACT

This study established nine categories which taken together define the open classroom. Three open classrooms at the grade levels four to six were used for this study. To gather the data the classrooms were observed, literature was reviewed, interviews were taken, and audio and video equipment was used. The data was then analyzed, and the categories were determined. The nine, identified, salient components of the open classroom were (1) adult(s) in residence, (2) child, (3) environment, (4) content/curriculum, (5) organization, (6) flexibility, (7) structure, (8) philosophy, and (9) support system. The components are common to both open and traditional education, but they are treated differently in open classrooms. They must all be there, and they must all work together. If any are weak or missing, the open classroom is bound to suffer. (A discussion of each category is included.) (Author/RC)

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THE OPEN CLASSROOM: SALIENT COMPONENTS

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ABSTRACT

THE OPEN CLASSROOM: SALIENT COMPONENTS

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Open Education in the United States has not been described in concrete terms. This study establishes nine categories which taken together define the Open Classroom. The categories were determined after in-depth, extensive data gathering and application of content analysis to data. The nine components are: Adult(s) in Residence, Child, Environment, Content/Curriculum, Organization, Flexibility, Structure, Philosophy, Support System.

These components are not unique to Open Classrooms, but they are treated differently in such classrooms. This was the principle finding of the study. They must all be there, and they must all work together. If any are weak, or missing, the Open Classroom is bound to suffer.

The investigator believes that this study has important implications in the following areas: teacher education, paraprofessional training, curriculum specialist education, curriculum development, school architecture and administration, instruction, learning child development, educational research. The author proposes that the components be considered as the basis for a theory about Open Education.

THE OPEN CLASSROOM: SALIENT COMPONENTS

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Introduction

The major objective of this study was to examine three Open Education classrooms at the 4-6 Grade levels to develop and test an analytic scheme that stated the salient components which taken together defined the Open Classroom. The study was conducted in three Open Classrooms in an integrated middle class suburb of New York City in 1972. A sub-objective was to conduct a scientific, scholarly study of Open Education of such a nature that up to the time of this study had not been done. A second sub-objective emerged as data were analyzed, that was the possibility of beginning to move toward a theory of Open Education. Rathbone (1970) had stated "...it is...assumed that the movement...embodies a theory, a philosophy, replete with a well integrated, clearly acknowledged and universally ascribed-to-set of principles." This writer suggests that the nine salient components be considered as a coherent group of general propositions that are used as principles of explanation for a class of phenomena, or what exists in the Open Classrooms, then they are part of a theory. Descriptions that arise from them, or from using them as a starting point, will be considered actual fact. If the descriptions are the actualities of the existing theory, then it can be seen that what we have is a true merging of theory and practice. In actual practice they will need to stand the test of time. Unless practitioners begin with a common understanding of foundational intents, the testing of a theory cannot commence. This paper consists of research methods used, and operational definitions of the components of Open Education, so that the listener (reader) will understand how they differ from any other classroom.

Theoretical Basis

There does not now exist a cohesive theory, philosophy or tightly organized system about the Open Classroom. Therefore it was difficult, if not impossible to state an hypothesis that was predictable and could be tested concerning this approach to education. An 'if...then' hypothesis was decided upon, with reference to C.F.Good (1966) for substantiation. The basic assumption of this study was:

there do exist certain salient characteristics that describe the Open Classroom. These characteristics can be classified and called components. The following statement became the theoretical basis for conducting the study: If the data-gathering devices mentioned are used, then the salient characteristics that describe the Open Classroom can be detected. By observing, viewing, interviewing, listening, describing, then classifying and analyzing the data, the components and sub-components shall become apparent as they emerge from the field research. Certain components were evident during several pilot observations. On the basis of those early observations, a field study approach was decided upon, and it was decided to use audio and video equipment, as well as personal interviews to see what exists.

Methods

Step I - Observations and Data Gathering

Data Source

1. Three Open Classrooms
2. Literature
3. Audiotapes
4. Videotapes
5. Typescripts
6. In-person notes
7. Descriptions
8. Abstract features noted
9. Slides
10. Interview notes (children, teachers, administrators)

On the basis of initial interest, prior experience, broad ideas of Open Classrooms, the investigator made initial pilot visits to the three Open Classrooms in the study. Then the literature was researched to see (1) whether other studies of Open Classrooms in America had been done, and (2) what other contributions had been made to further our knowledge about Open Classrooms. The search showed that to that time no definitive study had been done about Open Classrooms. R.S.Barth (1970) had put forth the notion that Open Classrooms consist of the teacher, the child, and the real world in interaction with one another. But, to this investigator the initial Open Classroom visits revealed that while what Barth states appears to be true, there seems to be more going on.

To research further what exists in Open Classrooms, it was decided that audio and video equipment be used, as well as other data gathering devices such as interview, observer, participant-observer techniques. Typescripts were made of the tapes, and notes were written from interviews and observations. Slides also served as a record for later analysis.

Step II - Analysis of Data

1. General inspection of data - recurring features noted - content analysis assigned
2. Tentative categories applied
3. Data re-analyzed using tentative categories - validating them
4. Further analysis placing data in appropriate category
5. Corroborated categories in the literature

The investigator then inspected the data. Recurring, repetitive features were underlined on typescripts. Content analysis was applied to the data with reference to Berelson (1952) and Holsti (1969). All notes, slides, videotapes, descriptions were again inspected and key features noted. The key features were written on separate sheets of paper and cards, and then grouped together where it seemed appropriate. Tentative categories were assigned to groups that had been made.

Typescripts and notes were again inspected and the tentative categories were applied and validated. The tentative categories were consolidated where it appeared appropriate. The categories, further refined, were then applied to the typescripts again. Slides and videotapes were viewed again and the categories were applied. It appeared that the categories, now refined to the nine salient components, did indeed exist in the examination of more data. Therefore the permanent categories were settled upon.

Data	Indicator	Permanent Category
T: They were watching the Wives of Henry VIII.... Mary Queen of Scots is playing at Radio City Music Hall. There is a play by the Lincoln Center Repertory Theater. . . . Channel 13 is running a series on Queen Elizabeth. Now they're really interested--why can't I take a group of kids down to Lincoln Center or a group or kids over to Radio City to see that? That would be so much more meaningful to them	Community resources Surrounding world Student interest Flexible curriculum experience	Environment Content and Curriculum Child Flexibility
I: So what we really have to do is go beyond, and expand the walls?	Open Classroom goes beyond walls of classroom	Environment
T: Yes. It's unfair. This to me, is just as important a part of the curriculum--more than anything that I can sit down and teach them in the classroom.	Curriculum	Curriculum
From notes taken while viewing videotape . . . nine-year-olds told the teacher that they thought that their body temperature changed with the weather. That is, when it got cold outside, they got cold, and when it was hot outside, they were hot. The children concluded that their body temperature rose and fell with the temperature of the weather. The teacher then decided to teach them that the body's temperature is 98.6, and normally stays that way, indoors or out, unless we are ill and the temperature rises or falls sharply. A lesson on body temperature, using thermometers, was developed. Along with this the children also studied weather.	Description of lesson on temperature developed from pupil interest Shows conceptual elevation Children Teacher-pupil interaction Pupil-pupil interaction seen in video	Content and Curriculum Child Adult Environment

Development of permanent categories

Example of content analysis applied to typescripts and notes.

The investigator then returned to the literature to see whether when proponents of the Open Classroom wrote about the Open Classroom, they wrote about these nine salient components. The categories were corroborated in the literature. Though the categories had been written about, they were diffused in the literature.

Step III - Results

There are nine salient components to Open Education. They are:

1. The Child
2. Adult(s) in residence
3. Environment
4. Content/Curriculum
5. Organization
6. Flexibility
7. Structure
8. Philosophy
9. Support System

The Salient Components of the Open Classroom

As a result of the research conducted as described, the Open Classroom can unambiguously be characterized by nine salient components (Schneiderman, 1973). The salient components are (1) the child, (2) adult(s) in residence, (3) environment, (4) content/curriculum, (5) organization, (6) flexibility, (7) structure, (8) philosophy, (9) a support system. These key components exist independently, and at the same time interact with, and support one another.

The components can be used to analyze Open Classrooms. If one or more of the components is weak or missing, the Open Classroom will suffer. Unless all of these nine salient components are considered in any analysis of a school situation, the analysis and any direction taken from that point is incomplete. An analysis of an Open Classroom should begin by taking each component separately and then asking questions about (1) whether the components exist in the program at all, (2) if so, how they operate, (3) to what degree and how well, (4) do they interact and support one another, (5) what can be done to improve the situation? As stated by the author in Golubchick and Persky (1975),

> "When Open Classroom programs fail, the chances are that the failures lie in the weaknesses of one or more of the components, and that those responsible for the program have not carefully examined the situation to see what may have gone wrong." (p.73)

Each component is applicable to both open and traditional classrooms, but the way in which they exist and operate is different. The way in which they operate in Open Classrooms is based upon their definitions. The following are definitions and descriptions of each component with emphasis upon Open Classrooms. In several descriptions reference is made to their use in traditional classrooms as well.

The Child

The child is the pivotal figure around which activities, materials, and the environment are planned. The teacher and other adults in the classroom learn to listen to the child's behavioral clues. Awareness of children's physical, intellectual, and emotional levels and needs, aids in designing strategies for learning experiments. Experiences may involve discussions, opportunities to interact, trips away from school premises, or a chance for the child to create a story, poem, or work of art. The child functions independently, while at the same time is interdependent with the adult(s) in residence who plan the content or curriculum, and environment. Sometimes adults and children mutually plan activities and surroundings.

In an Open Classroom, Frazier (1972) says that the child is seen "as an active agent in his own learning and there is interaction between learner and environment in cognitive development." The curriculum is molded to the child, rather than the child to the curriculum, in recognition of the child's physical, intellectual, and emotional needs.

Taking a cue from Rousseau, the child's nature is viewed as essentially good. Natural curiosity is nurtured. Since children learn best when they are involved in what they are learning, their lessons should derive from explorations of their own interests. Though the teacher should facilitate learning by asking questions and directing attention to new areas, the child's interests and abilities remain the starting point. The child is therefore to be respected as an individual and be treated with kindness and courtesy at all times.

As the teacher (or other adults) relate(s) to the child, the teacher must use restraint not to intervene too soon or at a time that would squelch natural curiosity. He must be able to follow the child's lead, pointing him towards other sources of learning (besides the teacher). The teacher is thus more a facilitator of learning than a "preacher teacher." It is the child who has the <u>experiences</u> that become personally relevant to his cognitive, emotional, and physical growth. The child does the learning. The teacher only helps.

Adult(s) in Residence

The adult(s) in residence are those adult persons who plan, organize, direct or assist with activities of the classroom. The category may further be divided into a variety of professional or semi-professional categories and teacher-assistant roles. They may include head teacher, student teacher, intern, parent aide, or specialist in a subject area. Although there may be a variety of auxiliary personnel in different staff capacities, the teacher is chief person in charge within the category of adult(s) in residence. However, since the children interact with all the adults, no single adult is more important than any other. Every adult has an important role.

Environment

Environment, an important component, has been given too little attention by educators. Environment consists of two subdivisions: (a) the physical setting for class congregation and (b) the materials in the environment. The physical setting includes the space surrounding the individuals in the classroom, outdoors, or on a school trip as the case may be. It involves the use of that space and its effect on the individuals. Displays of creations, storage reading and writing space are included. The spaces should be well designed and aesthetically appealing. The children and adults spend a good part of each day in school and their surroundings ought to contribute positively to their intellectual, psychological, and physiological well being. Children react and respond to environmental stimuli, so the physical environment should be conducive to developing ideas and learning. In an interesting environment, the child can best pursue a personal involvement with curriculum and content.

Content or Curriculum

Curriculum is a set of intentions, or a plan that provides opportunities for experiences through which children learn. Content is anything that is studied in the classroom which becomes the basis for discussion and activities. Content or curriculum is what the child makes use of, and ideally should flow from the child. That is, the child has an interest, the teacher discovers that interest and introduces or pursues the appropriate content or curriculum.

Traditional curriculum and content, at appropriate grade or age levels, can be a part of this process. If the traditional curriculum is of interest to the children, meets personal needs, and challenges the child's cognitive, physical, and emotional levels, there is no reason why it should be excluded. What matters is how the material is presented and organized, and whether it serves the needs and interests of the child.

Curriculum is not necessarily sequential in Open Classrooms. However, it is sequential to the extent that the child does work according to his ability, level, and pace, proceeding to the next level when he is ready. Sometimes an area of study that doesn't require prerequisite knowledge can be studied first. The curriculum is flexible enough so that sequences may be skipped if the child understands the next level and can proceed to one or more levels beyond that. Or, one level may be skipped and a child can return to that at a later time. As study activities require him to, the child moves about the classroom freely.

Organization

Organization in the Open Classroom is flexible while at the same time having structure. As Rathbone (1972) states, there is organization of space, time, grouping of children, and instruction. Children may be in one group for one activity and an hour later be regrouped for something else. There is a flow from one activity to the next. The structure exists in the way in which the groups are organized for specific activities, abilitites, and interests. Done properly, grouping is not done at random, unless there is a purpose in the random grouping. Rather than whole group instruction which is most always the case in traditional education classrooms, it is more common to see small groups at work in Open Classrooms.

In traditional classrooms, organization is usually based upon the most expedient way to teach the children, which generally involves the teacher giving instruction from the front of a classroom to all the children at the same time. However, if teaching is conceived of as a "teaching-learning" situation, that is, a give-and-take situation between teacher and learner, than other possibilities open up. In the same way, if it is thought that the child goes through certain learning experiences, a process, and the teacher gets feedback from the child's responses, then the teacher can more readily make decisions as to what activity to plan for next. Furthermore, if it is understood that this process takes differnt amounts of time for each learner, than possibilities for individualization, small group activity, and time-space organization emerge. Children who are at nearly the same level, or who work well together can be grouped in this way. The range of possibilities thus becomes "open-ended" rather than closed.

Flexibility and Structure

Flexibility and structure are each components in their own right, while permeating every other component. There is a time for flexibility, and a time for structure. The flexibility should never be so loose as to be disorganized and confusing. And structure should never be so tight as to be rigid and unadaptable to change. Often the structure is subtle. If this could be applied to traditional education, a world of possibilities could become a reality. Flexibility should exist in the furniture arrangements and materials that are used by the persons who live daily in these classrooms. Flexibility should be part of the curriculum and content, as they relate to the developing individuals from whom they stem.

Structure in the classroom is what the classroom stands for--its purpose and direction. Each curriculum area has a structure of its own that dictates the way in which it can best be pursued. Some subjects lend themselves to experimentation with materials, or at times, repetitive practices, as in mathematics, vocabulary development, or spelling. Other curriculum areas lend themselves to practical outdoor experiences, or trips to community resources. Sometimes there is time provided for each. The key is that each area has a structure of its own which is best learned about in a manner peculiar to its own characteristics. Learning should never be so structured and rigid as to be taught unvaryingly, without regard to curriculum or content area.

Philosophy

The philosophy of Open Classrooms centers around the developmental ideas of Dewey and Piaget. This means that learning progresses according to the developmental patterns unique to each individual involved in the learning process. It does not mean that one can do "far out" things just for the sake of doing them. Nor does it mean that "anything goes." It does mean that learning progresses in stages very much as Piaget has shown through his observations and experiments with children.

American traditional education during certain periods had elements of Deweyan philosophy. Much of this was distorted, and became misunderstood. Sometimes it was so distorted it was unrecognizable. The reason for this distortion was that Dewey was ahead of his time when he argued for developmental education. The educators of his day did not have the amount and kind of research based information about child development available to them as we do today. Therefore, although they had the concept of "education progressing in steps and stages according to the child's individual levels of development" -- hence, "progressive education" -- they could not fully implement it. They could not coordinate the concepts with the facts. At that time they did not have the volume of facts available to them that we have today. In order to conduct an Open Classroom properly, educators should understand the supporting philosophy and the original intents and contributions of Dewey and Piaget.

Support System

Last, but not least, there needs to be a support system for Open Classrooms. The term "support system" comes to education from aerospace technology. While at first jargon, it came to have meaning as United States space missions flourished in the '60's. It contributed the team support concept to the desired success of a program..."all the miscellaneous auxiliary equipment in support of the main central system that contributed to a total program" (Schneiderman, 1973, pp. 110). It means personnel support, financial backing, and all the technology involved in running the program.

If an Open Classroom, or a traditional classroom program, can be considered similar to a space mission, then the support system becomes vital to its success. It takes many people working together to get and keep it going. For all classrooms to function well there have to be satisfactory support systems. Analysis of the failure of Barth's (1972) experimental program shows that what went askew had to do with supports, for the program was well intentioned.

Conclusions

An analysis of the data gathered through the techniques described in the methodology section reveal that there are nine salient components of the Open Classroom. The components are (1) The child, (2) Adult(s) in Residence, (3) Environment, (4) Content or Curriculum, (5) Organization, (6) Flexibility, (7) Structure, (8) Philosophy, (9) Support System. Though the salient components remain the same, each successful program will be unique. The persons who assess a particular program will need to decide whether what will be instituted, or what is included, meets community goals, needs, and purposes. The components are common to both open and traditional education. Using the components as a measuring rod can help us know where we are, so that we can decide where it is we want to go, and then decide the best way to get there.

If educators apply these components, and by their descriptions (1) note whether they are consistently found in successful Open Classrooms, and (2) that if one or more are not in operation (as described) conclude that if they were included, the classroom would then prove to be successful, analyses of Open Classrooms would become phenomena, and patterns could be noted. Over a period of time, if these components and the principles they establish are repeatedly found to exist in Open Classrooms, and if they are recognized as valid by a great number of educators, then perhaps we can reach what Rathbone has called "a well-integrated, clearly acknowledged and universally ascribed-to set of principles" -- a theory of Open Education.

Questions Raised as a Result of this Study - Suggestions for Future Research

Perhaps more important than the study itself are the questions that the study raises, for it is as a result of these that possibilities arise for future research. Now that the major components of Open Classrooms have been determined, the following questions are raised: Is the Open Classroom for all children? For all teachers?

If not, how do we decide what the characteristics of children and teachers are, who work well in such settings? Does learning take place in Open Classrooms? What is the best way to measure learning in Open Classrooms? How are space, time, instruction and grouping best and most efficiently organized in Open Classrooms? Does an Open Classroom experience lead to autonomy in the child, or do children who are naturally autonomous work best in these environments? How do children socialize and become involved in projects in Open Classrooms? What should curriculums contain for training those who will teach and work in Open Classrooms? The author suggests that the above questions and many others that are unstated in this paper, but mentioned in Schneiderman (1973, p. 188-89), be topics for future research.

Any questions or comments on the ideas put forth in this paper can be addressed to the author at The School of Education, Brooklyn College, CUNY, or 90 Gold Street, New York, New York 10038.

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